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Re-orienting the postcolonial: responding to the South, working in the North

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Re-Orienting the Postcolonial:

Responding to the South, Working in the North

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I wish to speak to the problematic of this conference – rethinking the postcolonial – in the light of recent writing in international relations, security studies, development, peace-keeping and conflict resolution. (One might say the family of traditional discourses about the international except that the members of the family pretty much go their separate ways.) My analysis will take its bearings from critical currents of thought in south Asia and black Africa.

We need to begin with the recognition that postcolonialism is a broad church. There is agreement, of course, that colonialism is alive and well, that it is all around us still. And indeed now more visibly so than for some decades. That colonialism must be resisted is foundational, as is the need to foreground matters of knowledge – “knowledge to change the way we are”. From then on there is a good deal of diversity and plurality. There is disagreement about the origins of the discourse. There are the debates about whether to privilege the word or the world. There are the differences in how postcolonialism is read from place to place in the light of local politics and culture. Even if many of the debates are about high theory, it is apparent that politics is seldom far from the surface.

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The paper will make a case for a more “hands-on” politics, one that goes out into the world, for postcolonialism applied rather than left in the ether of high theory. So it is not simply about getting a better deal for Aboriginal people or asylum seekers and refugees but it is a matter of addressing the way our societies and the world order are constituted and working to change them for the better.

Two illustrations to drive the point home. John von Sturmer, Senior Fellow of the Institute and an anthropologist with a long experience of Aboriginal culture and politics, has argued that if we were to take seriously the colonialism on the part of the state and the exclusion of Aboriginal societies we would have to rethink our entire understanding of Australia, including our institutions and distorted system of cultural production.²

On the international front, the Indian novelist, Amitav Ghosh, has highlighted the need to address the spatial division of the world. Reflecting on the experience of UN peace-keeping missions he foresees the emergence of a two-tier system of nation-states. On the one side, in the north, the boundaries will become increasingly blurred; on the other, in the south, the boundaries will become increasingly rigid – the nation-state “so eagerly embraced by the peoples of the colonized world ... will become, effectively, the instrument of their containment”.³

Now a few words to set the war on terror in a broader historical perspective and to position postcolonial thought. Whether from the viewpoint of the non-European world the war on terror has brought into being a new grammar of international politics is open to doubt. I am not for a moment denying the elements of novelty – most notably surveillance and the enormity of its impact, but the collapse of the twin towers has overshadowed the continuities with earlier practice.

² John von Sturmer speaking at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies on 18 September 2009. See IPCS Newsletter, (March 2010), no.29, p.3.

³ Amitav Ghosh, “The Global Reservation: Notes towards an Ethnography of International Peacekeeping”, Cultural Anthropology, (1994) vol.9(3), pp.421-2.

Take the period of the Cold War. Intervention in various forms in the Third World became almost a way of international life. Yet its colonial nature was masked to a considerable extent by the categories of reference of Western thought, most notably about the struggle for the free world. The paradigms of security developed to maintain the central balance were extended outward to large parts of the non-European world, most notably the Middle East and south-east Asia. If it is true that they produced “the long peace”, as has been argued, they did so at the expense of promoting violence and instability on the periphery. In some respects the process was not so different from the horse trading in the period of European expansion over colonial claims and credits. (As Bismarck so graphically put it to the French Ambassador after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, “the Tunisian pear is ripe ... and the time has come for you to pluck it!”⁴) In terms of strategic doctrine what stands out is the belief in technology and dominant weapons, particularly with respect to fire power and mobility. This was taken to be the lesson of the Korean War, and found expression in the Republican “new outlook” of 1952, and later the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in 1956. Again precedents can be found in the colonial archive. I have in mind, for example, the “air control method” developed by the Royal Air Force in the 1920s and 1930s to police the Middle East through bombing to instil fear. One might say an early version of “shock and awe”. The same is true of the spatial strategies designed to separate us from them: the cantonments and civil lines in India; the huge trench dug in the Abadere Mountains in Kenya to cut off and contain the Mau Mau. Such zones of separation served both as a means of control to maintain social distance between ruler and ruled.

If we had the time it would not be hard to show how foreign aid and development worked in tandem with diplomatic and military interventionism. The process was one of bringing Third World people into the liberal trading order but it was seldom seen as such at the time. James Ferguson got it right when he observed that development was an “antipolitics machine”, “depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight”.⁵ He

⁴ Quoted in Nicholas Mansergh, The Coming of the First World War: A Study in the European Balance 1878-1914, (1949) London, Longmans, Green and Coy, p.44.

⁵ James Ferguson, The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development”, depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho, (1990) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.xv.

was writing about Lesotho but his argument applies with equal force to development as an international process. Shades of the close linkage that we observe today can be seen in the early Cold War days, as for example in the Colombo Plan. The interconnection became an article of faith for Robert McNamara in his seven years as Secretary of Defence in the US. As he put it later: “Security is development, and without development there can be no security.”⁶ Extending the time frame the nexus can be pushed back to classical political economy and to the Nineteenth Century diction of the “Great Commercial Republic of the World” which in the fullness of time would be a zone of peace as well as prosperity. It is here that you have the origin of the democratic peace theory.

How much of all this has been picked up by postcolonialism? Not that much I would say. There are suggestive leads, valuable treatment of particular episodes, such as the upsurge of interest in the Bandung Conference of 1955 or the radical stream of thought in international law but we don’t get much sense of the larger picture.

When we turn to the era of neoliberalism – say from the beginnings of the 1990s – I think it can be argued that the architecture of the present world order was basically put in place. In capsule form:

- not simply the reshaping of states in the south but the remaking of whole societies and the recasting of identities of ordinary people
- the principle of good governance, first put on the agenda by the World Bank’s 1989 study of sub-Saharan Africa
- the enabling role of the trope of “emergency”
- the debates about humanitarian intervention and, by the mid-1990s “the responsibility to protect”
- Naomi Klein’s “disaster capitalism”

And to backtrack, the discovery of “culture” by international relations scholars in the late 1980s which culminated in Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis first enunciated in 1993. In the

⁶ Robert McNamara, The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office, (1968) London, Hodder and Stoughton, p.149.

view of some it received its validation in 9/11. As we all know, it was strongly critiqued by postcolonial scholars for dividing the world into discrete chunks and because it was not about connection but enclosure. The point I want to emphasise is that Huntington put culture on the map for many students of IR but he did so by corralling it within a realist framework which led, almost inevitably, to conflict unless new constructions of the balance of power were put in place. Culture had, of course, been there all along and it was sufficiently malleable to be deployed in different ways. Part of the problem has been that certain strands of thinking about the international, notably realism and liberalism, have been so powerfully imprinted on the Western mindset that we cannot think beyond them.

It may be useful to give a vignette of how culture was deployed in the Cold War period by the United States. In this case it may not have been consciously so but very often it was. The need to win the support of Asia in the struggle against communism required a reworking of orientalist assumptions and making evident the ways in which development connected with local culture. The work of reclamation is exemplified by the novel The Ugly American, written by two American political scientists, William Lederer and Eugene Burdick.⁷ The Ugly American, which is really a series of linked short stories, was a response to Graham Greene's The Quiet American and its sharp critique of American universalism. The main protagonist Homer Atkins is shown to be as at home in an Asian village, building and marketing his water pump, as in California. The local peasants think and act like Americans, and respond to economic incentives similarly. In such ways, the novel depoliticizes America's problems in Asia by dissolving cultural difference. The novel was a popular success and made an immediate impact. Four public figures – including J.F. Kennedy – sent copies to each member of the United States Senate. Senator William Fulbright critiqued the book from the floor of the Senate. Richard Nixon made use of the novel in a major speech before his presidential nomination.

This brings us to where we are now and to rethinking the postcolonial. I have two propositions to put to you. First, postcolonialism as a discourse has been strangely silent about

⁷ William J Lederer and Eugene Burdick, The Ugly American, (1969 – first published 1958) London, Corgi Books.

many of the key issues in contemporary international politics – the invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the whole question of development, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and the like. I would argue that this is part and parcel of postcolonialism’s reluctance to engage with other discourses about the international. In a special issue of New Formations in 2006, entitled “After Iraq: Reframing Postcolonial Studies”, the editors argue that the invasion and occupation of Iraq represents a watershed for postcolonial studies, requiring a fundamental change in the framing assumptions, organizing principles and intellectual habits of the field. What Iraq shows is that the world hasn’t changed...The central task enforced on postcolonial scholars is “to work towards the production of a new ‘history of the present’”.⁸ This call for a redirection of postcolonial criticism connects with earlier complaints that postcolonialism has lost its radical edge, that it principally addresses the needs of the Western academy and that it floats in the ether of high theory at the expense of being applied.

On the matter of development, only a handful of postcolonial scholars have addressed its politics. Lamenting the stand-off that prevails, Christine Sylvester has pithily observed, “development studies does not tend to listen to subalterns and postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating.”⁹

My second proposition is that it is not enough to critique the present global order; postcolonialism needs to come up with an agenda for change. Obviously there is unlikely to be agreement about how to proceed but my argument is that postcolonialism should take the everyday as its principal reference point. This would challenge the existing top-down approach although no one imagines that the everyday would dislodge the hierarchies that characterize the international. Still it would represent an alternative starting-point, a different node of knowledge. Moreover, the everyday picks up on a tradition of thought in postcolonial studies, most fully developed in subaltern studies. It also meshes with the theory and practice of social movements and with the thrust of complexity theory. The problem is that in postcolonial

⁸ Priyamvada Gopal and Neil Lazarus, “Editorial”, New Formations, 59, 2006, pp.7-9.

⁹ Christine Sylvester, “Development Studies and Postcolonial Studies: disparate tales of the ‘Third World’”, Third World Quarterly, (1999) 20(4), pp.703-721 at p.703.

studies the everyday has not much been taken out into the international and after it has been unduly romanticized. It has also been employed as a blanket concept in very different societies.

I wish to suggest that we need to make a broad distinction between the everyday in ex-colonial, non-European societies and the everyday in the North, at least so far as action at the international level is concerned. The argument is that we in the North, instead of involving ourselves in other peoples' everyday in the South, should be attending to our own everyday at home. There are strong grounds for thinking that intervention in the life-worlds of non-European everyday should be avoided in most circumstance. The same might be said of Aboriginal politics in Australia. The everyday in other societies, and in certain aspects our own, can no longer be regarded as an open book, available to all as a kind of global property. Stemming from concerns in and relating to anthropology and ethnology, normative conventions about representations, knowledge ownership and repatriation, and responsibility to the people who are the subject of investigation must now guide what is said and done in all disciplinary fields and dramas of action.¹⁰

There is a more fundamental reason why we in the North should be wary of becoming directly involved in the politics of the everyday in the non-European world, namely that it can stand in the way of local people authoring their own political subjectivity, of becoming political in their own way. Here I would like to bring in a recent study of the emergence of the political subject by Ranabir Samaddar.¹¹ Although Samaddar nowhere refers to "the everyday", his work speaks to it in a distinctive way. His concern is to show that politics in former colonial countries such as India is a discourse of actions rather than one of philosophical reflection as understood in the European tradition. He proceeds by focussing on "situations" and

¹⁰ Key texts here include Karena Shaw, "Whose Knowledge for what Politics?", *Review of International Studies* (2003) 29, 199-221, Julian Eckl, "Responsible Scholarship After Leaving the Veranda: Normative Issues Faced by Field Researchers – and Armchair Scientists", *International Political Sociology* (2008) 2, 185-203 and Wanda Vradi, "The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (2008) 37, no.2, 279-301.

¹¹ Ranabir Samaddar, *Emergence of the Political Subject*, (2010) New Delhi: Sage Publications. My summary is mostly drawn from the introduction, xi-xxxii.

“positions”, perhaps “daily and ordinary”, which help shape the emergence of the political subject.

The conclusion I draw is that development would be best advanced by the First World maintaining a certain distance from other people’s everyday and concentrating on working with its own. The temptation to colonise other people’s everyday is built into liberal theorising and has deeply marked the history of Western involvement in non-European societies. For so long the problem of underdevelopment has been located in the otherness of “out there”. Often enough the knowledge gained on the ground has been used – at times with the best intentions – to wipe the slate clean for a new regime, not only of theoretical knowledge but of applied politics. Think of the role of missionaries in the expansion of empire. Livingstone, for instance, whose understanding of central African society was remarkable for his time. Yet, convinced that Christianity would never prosper unless tribal society was undermined, he wrote of “the advance of ruthless colonists” as a “terrible necessity”.¹²

The other side of my argument is that much more attention needs to be paid to the work of development in the North, particularly with regard to advocacy and education. In part the neglect of the task at home is a function of the preoccupation with knowledge transfer, not exchange; with changing the behaviour of others but not ourselves. But a good deal more at stake than simply an ordering of spheres of priority. The mindset that sees the South as the site for action helps to shield from view deeply troubling aspects of the politics of home which need to be confronted. One is the historical role of the First World in its imperial projection in contributing to the poverty, instability and violence in the non-European world through the appropriation of resources, uneven development, the strengthening of ethnic identifications and so on. As we have seen, there are continuities today but there is a widespread refusal to acknowledge them in such terms. Another is the part played by the Western powers in determining the structure and workings of the international system – which resulted in the collapse of the scheme for a new international economic order nearly forty years ago.

¹² Tim Jeal, *Livingstone* (1973) London: Heinemann, 105. See also 54-5 and 373-4.

It is not enough to tie the problem to Western policy-makers. That is part of the story but the political elites especially draw sustenance from the everyday. Alongside the survival of militarist attitudes and orientalist tropes from an earlier era, numerous critics have pointed to a growing assertiveness and intolerance in Western culture, taking the form of the new racism and a revival of interest in imperial overlordship. With material affluence now the norm, John Kenneth Galbraith has written about what he sees as the ugly side of the “culture of contentment”: a negativity towards those who have failed to succeed, not least internationally. Add to his the fears and insecurities associated with globalization, terrorism, refugees and asylum seekers.

The net result has been that the politics of the everyday has come to be tapped selectively to support supposed national interests and the electoral prospects of politicians. As it has been refracted at the political level, then, the culture of the everyday has not been conducive to taking constructive initiatives with respect to either development or security. There was a time when political leaders were not surrounded by spin doctors and were less susceptible to the insecurities and prejudices at grassroots. Churchill, for instance, repudiated the idea that he should take into account the assumed reactions of the electorate before he arrived at decisions. He told the House of Commons in 1951. “It is said that leaders should keep their ears to the ground. All I can say is that the British nation will find it very hard to look up to leaders who are detected in their ungainly posture.”

Perhaps in the discussion we can consider the kind of initiatives that might be taken to help reshape everyday culture in Australia and the North more generally. I will conclude with the observation that the coming together of security and development – as evidenced in the AusAID White Paper of April 2006 and the signing of a Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Department of Defence and AusAID in April 2009 – opens a window of opportunity. I don’t underestimate the formidable difficulties in changing the culture but recasting one line of thinking about overseas policy should facilitate recasting its twin.

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